

## CHAPTER 7

May 31, 1944 – Evening. Stuttgart, Germany.

Anna Schmidt

Anna Schmidt pressed the final candle to her son's cake with as much care as she had taken baking the confection itself. She had sculpted the white icing to resemble a fighter plane, as was his latest fascination. The bold swastika was daubed in black icing on the wings. Under the plane she had written happy birthday Karl in elaborate scroll using the same black icing. She stood back, allowing her husband Josef to light the ten small tapers; two yellow, two red and six blue, Karl's favourite colour. At least for today. His favourites changed on a weekly basis, along with what he wanted to be when he became a man.

At eight, he'd sworn he would work beside Josef in the factory, an aspiration which his father had quickly talked him out of. At nine, a traveling circus had stirred fantasies of the trapeze and tumbling clowns. Now, reaching the monumental age of ten, he longed for a Luftwaffe uniform and the sky. Surrounded by so many soldiers in their smart uniforms, looking tall and gallant, it was an understandable desire. It was difficult not to be attracted to the idea of her grown son in a similar attire, perhaps a famous fighter ace like Erich Hartmann, sporting his medals proudly on his tunic. But Anna was torn by that prospect. The pleasure that flickered in her chest at the idea of her son serving his country was quickly extinguished by dread.

She had seen too many women standing rigid in their doorways, the colour drained from their faces. They would hold letters gripped in their knuckle white hands, written in the Führer's bold script, telling them how courageously their child had served his country and how bravely he

had died. The thought felt cold and hollow in Anna's stomach. She had watched those grieving mothers lift their heads in pride when friends and neighbours had offered their sympathy, but she had also seen the dark pain of loss behind those tortured eyes.

Perhaps the war might be over by the time Karl was old enough to serve, but it had been almost five years now since German tanks had rolled into Poland. It might be another five years or longer to achieve a final German victory.

Anna shook off the dark thoughts and placed her arm around her husband's waist, and for a moment they both basked in the warm glow of the candlelight. Josef had wanted to give his son the perfect birthday, and she loved him that little bit more for that. After all, didn't he work so very hard at the munitions factory so that they could have these things?

Josef lifted the cake carefully and carried it from the kitchen into the sitting room. He hunkered down and placed it on a small, low metal table, cobbled together from cannon shells and a salvaged artillery plate. War left its mark on everything, even childhood.

"Karl's very excited," he said, standing and admiring his handiwork. "He won't go to sleep until we've done this. And it would be good to get it out of the way in case the bombers come tonight."

Anna understood that. The sun had disappeared behind the houses on its downward path and the sky was darkening rapidly. The bombers had been frequent guests of the Stuttgart night skies and although they routinely attacked the city, they never strayed this far out. The family had spent more nights in the shelters than in their own beds of late.

"Close the curtains, Josef, and I'll turn off the light," she said.

Josef pulled the drapes together and Anna switched off the single light. The room was now lit only by the candles on the cake. The yellow light flickered, and shadows danced across their faces.

“That’s better,” he said.

“Is little Edith asleep yet?” she asked.

“Fast asleep,” he replied. “Our trip to the park has worn her out. It’s worn me out too, and I have a twelve hour night shift ahead.”

“Let’s not wake her then,” she implored. “Tonight is just for the three of us. You, me and Karl.”

“Like the old days,” he recalled, fondly.

Edith was just one year old, born into a Germany that was conquering the world. Now their nation was gearing up for imminent invasion.

Anna checked the room one last time: the cake prepared, the gift wrapped. She nodded to herself, satisfied, and said to her husband, “Go and get him, Josef.”

Her husband left the room and Anna listened to his heavy footsteps on the stairs. It made her smile. He was like a kid himself, all six foot of him. In his excitement to give his son the gift he had made for him, he would almost certainly wake their daughter.

Anna moved the package wrapped in brown paper, from the kitchen into the main room. She had tried her best to mask its shape so as not to give away its true nature before the revealing. Two minutes later she could hear two sets of footsteps descend. Then the door opened slowly and Anna heard her husband say, “Close your eyes Karl, no peeking.”

The child dutifully covered his eyes, squeezing them tight shut with exaggerated seriousness, a wide grin stretching across his face. He loved his father without reservation, and despite his excitement he was a respectful boy and did what his father told him. Although Karl was ten, it wasn't difficult to see the father in the child. He was tall for his age, his dark hair and eyes making him an almost carbon copy of Josef.

Anna felt a little envious that she could see nothing of herself in him. Maybe the gentler curve of his face, not as angular as his father's. And now as she studied him closer, maybe that nose.

"May I open my eyes now, father," Karl pleaded.

"Go ahead."

The boy's hands flew from his eyes, and a gasp of delight escaped his lips as his gaze fell upon the large shapeless package leaning against the wall by the fireplace.

"Oh mother, is it..." His eyes darted from the gift to the cake, as if letting either one out of his sight for more than a second would make the moment dissolve.

"You'll find out soon enough," she said. "First, you must blow out the candles and make a wish."

Karl knelt by the table and looked up at the faces of his parents bathed in the golden light from the candles. Anna could almost see the child and the adult superimposed on his face. The innocence of youth and the wisdom of age, all there to see, carved into the flesh as he stood on the boundary between boy and man. He took a deep breath and blew out the candles. Nine blinked out but the last gutted and reignited. With the remaining pocket of air in Karl's lungs, he extinguished the final one, and whispered his wish like a secret prayer.

Anna stooped down beside him and ran her fingers through his hair. "Happy birthday my little man. I love you."

"I love you too, mother." Karl's eyes darted over her shoulder, betraying his eagerness. "May I?"

Anna gave his head a pat. "You may."

Karl ran to the package and began tearing at the brown paper, eventually reducing it to strips laying discarded on the floor. Beneath the wrapping stood a bike, a thing of beauty. Anna knew that her husband had found an old, discarded bicycle left in the ruins of a bombed-out house. He had taken it to the factory and during spare moments on his night shifts, he had fashioned a new bike, using any spare discarded metal he could scavenge. The wheels had been the most difficult to rebuild, and finding tyres had required a few favours. It even had a bell and was painted in the brightest blue.

"It's wonderful, father." Karl exclaimed, close to tears, and when Anna looked at her husband, she could see the mirrored joy there with the solitary trail of a tear tracing a line down his own cheek.

Through the open upper casement window, Anna heard urgent shouts and the distant bark of dogs moving closer. A sudden hammering on the front door made her jump with alarm and the urgency of the pounding made her hesitate. She stared across at her husband who was similarly frozen by the noise. The knocking came again, the door rattling in its frame. Josef made to go to the door but Anna hissed at him, "Don't answer it."

"I must," he said. "It might be important."

Anna knew what he meant. They had to be above reproach, to be seen as good Germans.

He opened the door to reveal a woman and her young daughter trembling on the threshold, drenched from the sudden rainstorm. The girl clutched a colourful doll, her knuckles white, her eyes hollow with terror. She was a few years younger than Karl, dressed in a white summer dress with yellow flowers, soiled by dirt and rain.

The woman was clearly frantic, and her eyes darted back down the street at the advancing sound of the dogs. She turned back to Josef.

“You work with my husband,” she said, breathlessly. “The soldiers have taken him. Please hide us, before they come.”

Before Josef could respond, Anna pushed Karl back and then stepped up beside her husband.

“Why are they chasing you?” she demanded. “What have you done?”

“We’ve done nothing wrong,” the woman said. “They want to send us to one of those camps.”

“Get away from here,” Anna growled. Her husband stared at her, shocked at the cold tone in her voice.

“If not me, then take my child,” The woman pleaded, thrusting the young girl forward. “Please don’t let the soldiers have her.”

The child was quietly weeping and clinging to her doll. Karl was watching this pantomime proceed from behind his father, his birthday momentarily forgotten. Outside, the sound of the dogs got louder, perhaps only a street away now.

“Anna, she is just a child,” Josef said.

“We cannot,” Anna said. “We dare not.”

Clearly exhausted, the woman collapsed onto the doorstep, the child desperately trying to lift her up.

Anna pushed herself in front of her husband and slammed the door.

They both took a step back. She glanced through the closed curtain. The woman and child had gone. The dogs were very close now and there came another harsh knock at the door, followed by the barked order, "Open up!"

Tentatively, Anna opened the door to reveal two soldiers standing on the doorstep.

The senior officer stared past the couple into the interior of the house. He said, "I am Hauptmann Mundt. Have you seen a woman and a young girl?"

"They just knocked on our door," Anna blurted out. "I sent them away. Who are they?"

"A Jewish family."

Anna's lip curled up in disgust. "Dirty Jews."

Mundt issued a command to the other soldier who continued down the street. "I must search your house," he said.

"Of course," Anna said. "We are loyal Germans and have nothing to hide."

Mundt entered the dwelling and searched the downstairs followed by the upstairs, Anna walking just behind him as he looked in cupboards and under beds. He glanced around the ceiling.

"Do you have a loft?" he asked.

"No, we don't," Anna said.

Mundt nodded. "Thank you."

He returned to the front of the house just as the other two soldiers returned, one soldier marshalling the two dogs, the other soldier dragging the woman and her daughter in his wake.

“We found them, sir,” one of the soldiers announced. “They were hiding in one of the bombed houses.”

The woman had a deep gash under one eye, bloodied and bruising quickly.

“What’s this?” Mundt demanded. “Why is she bleeding?”

“She resisted,” the soldier quickly explained. “I had to restrain her.”

Anna realised the hauptmann was not happy with the fact the woman had been beaten. He scowled at the soldier who shrunk back under the harsh scrutiny.

“We will take them to the truck,” he said. “And if I see any more unnecessary damage to this woman, I will put you on report, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” the soldier answered.

The officer turned back to Anna and said, “Please forgive my intrusion.”

Karl tugged at Anna’s sleeve, oblivious to the unfolding horror. “Look, Mommy, he has an Iron Cross!” The boy was pointing at Mundt, his eyes glowing with delight.

In all the confusion, Anna hadn’t noticed the medal. Now she stared at the small black cross pinned to the officer’s chest.

“It is an honour to help a brave soldier of the fatherland,” she said.

Mundt was still uncomfortable with the attention the medal created. He was about to offer some humble appreciation when he noticed the woman frowning and staring past him into the shadows across the street. He followed her gaze and could see a group of people, maybe five or six, all gathered together under the pale flickering light of a streetlamp. They seemed to be staring at the house.

“Who are they?” Mundt asked.

Anna said, "I don't know, Hauptmann. They were not there a moment ago."

Mundt stepped towards the group but the street light suddenly winked out plunging the street into total darkness. He aimed his torch at the area which was now completely empty. He turned back to the house and wished the couple a good evening. The soldier took hold of the mother's arm and escorted her down the street. Mundt grabbed the child's wrist and pulled her after her mother.